Baselining the Project Plan

Assigning the PM and Establishing a Project Baseline

Project startup is a relatively short process group within the project management methodology. It is a transition period after the point of time when management decides to begin the project and the development of real project deliverables during project execution.

The very first steps of the project start-up process are:

1. Assign the Project Manager.
2. Baseline the Project Plan.

The initial baselining activity is the process of assigning real dates to the project schedule. This is possible at this point in time since the Project Manager would know the actual start date. Until the initial baseline Project Plan is created, it is impossible to begin staffing the project and establishing meeting dates.

After baselining the Project Plan, there are several other important events within start-up, including:

- Commit project resources by agency management
- Create a project database
- Conduct project kick-off meeting
- Complete the start-up checklist.

The project startup is a significant event in the life of a project. The project team must be quickly formed, resources must be brought together, and the Project Plan must be finalized. Time lost in this process is very difficult to recover. Projects that begin poorly rarely end on time and on budget.

Baselining a Project Plan also refers to placing the Project Plan under change management control so that changes to the Project Plan are made under the change control process as discussed in *Change Management* within Chapters 3 and 5.

Fine Tuning the Project Plan

A final tuning of the Project Plan typically occurs during the project start-up process. This fine tuning consists of incorporating changes that result from management review or, in the case of a project that involves procurement, changes that result from contract negotiations. Only minor changes can be made to the Project Plan at this time—major changes require a return to the project planning process.

Minor changes are defined as a refinement of activities and alterations to the schedule based on emergencies, vacations or other short-term schedule conflicts. Changes that result in more than a 5% increase in cost or schedule should be viewed as a major change, and appropriate feedback should be given to the Project Sponsor.

Gaining Final Approval of the Project Plan

During the start-up process, the Project Plan is finalized and approved by the Project Sponsor. At this point, resources are committed and are quickly transitioned to the execution process.

For major changes to the Project Plan during start-up, the final Project Plan approval process varies depending on the project and may require approval from the following: Steering Committee, customer, Project Sponsor, and if required, the Project Review Team/Oversight of ITAB. If the effort includes contractors, it may be necessary to get the prime contractor and procurement to sign off on the revised Project Plan.

Starting the Project Database

A project database is a repository of information maintained on a project. This database provides a historical record of project activities. Planned and actual activity information is maintained. This database will be used throughout the project and will be kept for review and planning of future projects.

State organizations will both be responsible for maintaining information relative to projects. This data collection should begin at project start-up and will be updated throughout the project until the end of the close-out process.

Contents of the Database

The database will contain at least the following types of information:

- Project summary information
- Planned and actual financial information
- Planned and actual schedule information
- Planned and actual staffing information
- Project requirements list and requirements changes
- Project risks and mitigation measures
- Project issues and action items log
- Work Product Identification with planned and actual delivery dates
- Change items
- Quality audit results
- Post mortem
- Customer evaluation

How is the Historical Data Used?

Historical project data serves as a knowledge base and a repository for future planning efforts. Any Project Manager can utilize this information in planning new projects. It is helpful to learn from past successes and failures, particularly if you do not desire to experience failure first hand.

> ***Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.***
> ***— George Santayana***

Resource Commitments

Once the project has been given the official go ahead, it is important to quickly establish the Project Team and the project environment. Within project staffing, specific individuals are assigned to the planned project roles. In other words, you are putting names to the roles on the Project Organization Chart.

Initially, the number of people brought to the team will probably be small. Groups represented on the Chart will probably be limited to key participants who are tasked with getting the project underway. These initial leaders will work to ensure that staff, equipment and facility resources are in place when needed. The remaining team members are assembled as defined in the Project Plan.

Development of Work Packages

Early in the process, the Project Manager and other key team leaders begin development of the detailed work packages or work assignments for each team member. These work packages describe the specific responsibilities of each team member.

The work package defines the specific task to be completed, identifies the budget and indicates when milestones and deliverables are due. A work package has the following characteristics:

- Represents units of work at the level where the work is performed
- Clearly distinguishes one work package from all others
- Contains clearly defined start and end dates that represent tangible accomplishments
- Specifies a budget in terms of dollars, hours or other measurable units
- Limits the work to be performed to a short period to facilitate tracking. This period should generally be from 8 to 80 hours of work.

See Appendix B: Forms to see a blank Project Work Assignment.

Assignment of Personnel

The Project Manager is concerned with properly staffing the effort with personnel that meet the skill requirements. As part of this activity, there will be final negotiations over what personnel can be assigned and when they will be available. There may well be hiring and new employee introductions, and there may be a search for qualified experts who can assist in special problem areas. Training will need to be scheduled and conducted, if required.

Time must be made for effective communication. This staffing period requires the attention of the Project Manager to ensure that new personnel are adequately briefed on the project and fully understand their roles and responsibilities. This effort is facilitated by a detailed Project Plan, but still requires careful management by the Project Manager and team leads.

Project Start-Up

Team Review of Requirements

It is beneficial to have every team member have a general understanding of the overall project. This process can be accomplished by:

- Providing documentation for the team to review
- Scheduling team meetings where the Project Plan is reviewed.

These meetings work well for the initial members of the team, but those personnel who are added to the project later may miss important information. For sizable projects that require large numbers of new personnel, team orientation briefings can occur frequently to review the overall scope of the effort.

Key objectives of the requirements review are to:

- Review the system specification
- Review project milestones
- Review procedures and standards that apply to the effort
- Develop an understanding of the whole system, project, program, etc.
- Call attention to any high-risk portions of the project
- Develop buy in and ownership of the project’s Project Plan
- Orient team members on all relevant quality assurance and change management processes.

Acquiring Facilities and Tools

Next to staffing, adequate and timely availability of facilities and tools are needed to manage the project to match the Project Plan. At project startup, the Project Manager must ensure that the facilities required for the project teams will be available when needed.

These facilities include physical floor space, office equipment, environment, infrastructure to support the work effort and basic supplies and equipment that the team will need to perform their assignments.

It is very important that the Project Manager creates an organized environment with proper office space and equipment. Poor execution of the project start-up process results in poor team morale that can be difficult to overcome, especially where project team members are left idle while waiting for delivery of products.

Tools for information technology include development hardware, case tools and tools for performing management functions such as time management, tracking and change management. Many of these tools have a lead time involved in both procurement and establishment. Always remember to allow for procurement, training and testing of any needed tools.

The Project Kick-off Meeting

Communication is critical to the success of any project. One key communication technique is project meetings. One task that is to be completed at the start of a project is to conduct the first major project meeting, known as the Project Kick-off Meeting. The Project Plan can be finalized after the Project Kick-off Meeting because potential concerns might be expressed during this meeting from the stakeholders.

The Kick-off Meeting may be the most important meeting of the project because it allows the Project Manager to help set customer expectations. Project Managers should remember that people are generally satisfied if they get what they expected to get. It is vitally important for the Project Manager to manage customer expectations throughout the project.

Purpose of Meeting

The Kick-off Meeting provides a forum to:

- Publicly state that the project is beginning
- Communicate the shared view of the project
- Establish commitments by all stakeholders who affect the project's outcomes, especially commitments involving time and availability
- Review the goals, objectives and success factors of the project
- Ask and answer questions.

Who Should Attend?

This meeting is a gathering of the project team, stakeholders, executive management and others who need to officially recognize the start of a project.

Key stakeholders should attend the meeting to show support and to discuss the Project Plan. Attendance by other team members should be optional since large Kick-off Meetings can be very expensive.

Format of the Kick-off Meeting

The format of the meeting should be driven by:

- The size of the project
- The complexity of the project.

Projects that have multiple locations involved will need coordination, tele-conferences or other assistance for this meeting.

The timeframe is usually one to two hours and should not be viewed as a status meeting. Generally, the format is a presentation model with a question-answer time near the end of the meeting. Notification of the meeting should be formal and in writing to convey the importance of the project's beginning. Some key stakeholders and executive management may need to be contacted prior to selecting a date to determine their schedule availability.

What Follows from Here?

People who attend the meeting should leave with a clear view of:

- The project organization and the key project staff
- The project charter – problem, goals, objectives, success factors
- The general schedule, budget and activities
- The key stakeholders
- The benefits that are expected upon completion of the project
- The challenges or risks to completing the project
- The assumptions and detailed explanations
- Activities that will occur within the next several days or weeks.

Using the Start-Up Checklist

A good way to ensure that all start-up tasks are completed is to use a start-up checklist. The checklist can be used by anyone to ensure that the tasks necessary to start the project have been completed or will be completed soon. A start-up checklist is provided in appendices of this manual. The start-up checklist is a combination of an action list and a tool to verify that necessary steps have been completed. This list addresses the following kinds of activities, though not necessarily in this order:

- Tracking and monitoring processes and the format for this information
- Finalizing the project schedules
- Reviewing the change management processes and ensuring the assignment of this responsibility
- Reviewing the quality assurance processes and ensuring that they are implemented
- Determining how issues will be raised and tracked
- Reviewing the Risk Management Plan to ensure that all planned preventative activities are in place and that resources are available for risk contingency plans
- Establishing the project environment
- Finalizing the project baseline
- Identifying any resolved project standards and tools
- Refining the roles and responsibilities of the project team members
- Setting expectations for all stakeholders
- Defining all the project control processes
- Obtaining and allocating resources
- Conducting the Project Kick-off Meeting.

The Project Manager own and manage the start-up checklist, although the full team provides input. In large projects, the completion of the start-up checklist might be assigned as an administrative support function.

The Project Manager should feel free to add any additional items to the master list for items or activities they believe to be important.

The checklist includes a column for the status of each item. The status can be indicated as follows:

- Y = Item has been addressed and is complete.
- N = Item has not been addressed, but should be.
- N/A = Not Applicable. The item is not related to this project.
- P = Partial. Item has been addressed and some issue resolution is needed to complete the item.

Each item on the check list should note plans to resolve “N” or “P” entries. The Project Team can choose to put some items from this list under change management. It can also be shared during the Kick-Off Meeting.

CHAPTER 4
PROJECT START-UP